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The Appeal of British Sociology; a View from Outside and Inside

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In the 60 years of the BSA's existence many people from Eastern Europe have contributed to its achievement. I can proudly point out that my compatriots especially distinguished themselves. The list of social scientists originally from Poland who worked or are still working in the UK is relatively long; it is enough to mention here Stanislaw Andreski (1919-2007) and Zygmunt Bauman. However, while the concept of 'diaspora', at least to some degree, describes the fate of dislocated generations, Poles recently entering UK departments of sociology no longer fit this image. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, the EU enlargement, cheap travel, the spread of the English language - all these factors have increased the cross-border dimensions of contemporary academic life. So, in a contemporary Europe without major disaster zones, under conditions of high mobility, working in an increasingly international sociological field has become easier and does not require either rejection or endorsement of any particular culture. My own journey from Poland started many years ago at a time when things were more complicated. Nevertheless, I too have come to follow the border-crossing career trajectories of sociologists. After working in Poland, the USA and Australia, in 2002 I accepted a professorship in the Department of Sociology in the University of Leicester. Knowing the history and the role of Leicester in the development of UK sociology, in particular the presence over many years of Norbert Elias, I was looking forward to this opportunity. I have been attracted by Elias's ideas ever since his first volume of *The Civilizing Process* was translated into Polish in 1980 and have been exploring his perspective in my writings, for example, in my book on *Informality* (Misztal 2001). Moreover, I was keen to join British sociology as it, in contrast to North American sociology, exhibits a marked fusion of various approaches and it offers a possibility to develop more broad social thought. I was also attracted to British sociology because of its critical stand, interdisciplinarity, diversity, and the fact that although already well institutionally established, it was still far from the American level of closure through professionalization. The type of open-ended sociology which offers all-embracing knowledge of the social word and generates exciting and productive debates appealed to me because my experience of living under the all-intrusive state in Poland and the type of training I received taught me to value sociology as an independent and synthetic field of studies.

In my student years at the Institute of Sociology in the University of Warsaw, we were lucky to be exposed to broad, rather eclectic, interdisciplinary teaching which grappled with large comparative themes. Yet, even though cultural and political freedom was greater in Poland than in other countries of the 'socialist camp', not many Western books and ideas were easy accessible. Thus, the majority of people studying sociology in Warsaw in the 1970s were not very knowledgeable about British sociology; we knew more about British social anthropology, especially about the contribution of our compatriot, Bronislaw Malinowski. Nonetheless, despite limited access, we were impressed by many distinctive characteristics of British sociology and came to believe that there was such a thing as the British tradition that consisted of community studies, citizenship and conflict. We admired Marshall's notion of citizenship, John Goldthorpe *et al.*'s (1969) *The Affluent Worker*, Michael Mann (1973) *Consciousness and Action in the Western Working Class*, E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*(1963) and John Rex and Robert Moore (1967) *Race, Community and Conflict.* Although the geopolitical, cultural and economic background of social sciences in Poland was totally different to that of the UK, the British working class studies provided the framework for my PhD. My subsequent research was a result of my interest in how things work in a different, not undemocratic, political environment. Thus, my first two books published in the UK, *Trust in Modern Society* (1996) and *Informality* (2001), are comparative studies of habits of life in democratic and in undemocratic environment. They were still reflections of somebody, who, to use the title of Said's (1999) autobiography, felt herself to be 'out of place' and cannot stop wondering about the different nature of normality and relationships in the new context. Writing *Theories of Social Remembering* (2003), I placed myself within the humanistic tradition of sociology which I learned from British historical sociologists. Following Bauman's conviction (2003) that one of the main tasks for contemporary sociology is to inform people about the social forces that threaten to diminish freedom and political democracy, I devoted my *Intellectuals and the Public Good* (2007) to explore the ways in which the civil courage and creativity of public intellectuals served to expand the democratic imagination and civic sensitivity of both citizens and their leaders. My analysis was built around the identification of courageous conduct by public

intellectuals who had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. With China's imprisonment of Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace laureate, and Beijing's boycott of the Nobel Peace ceremony, the relevance of my examination of the difference civil courage makes to the functioning of institutions and to the scope and quality of civil society becomes even more obvious. Recently, in the context of the shrinking of the welfare state, the growing feeling of insecurity, the fears connected with the decline of social protection and security, I have developed further my interest in democracy's ability to serve people. Arguing in my forthcoming book *The Challenges of Vulnerability* that the issue of vulnerability has acquired a *Zeitgeist*-like status, I assign to sociology the role of communicating the social character of human suffering and thus aim to contribute to debates about how to reduce the experiences of vulnerability. Arguing that the social sciences have a very important role to play in developing a comprehensive understanding and awareness of vulnerability, I suggest that the essential purpose of all 'humane sociology' (Gouldner 1975) is to evaluate the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others.

Such a goal, given that the current conditions of knowledge production in British universities and competing definitions of academic excellence, which both neither help to overcome the processes of fragmentation of sociology nor necessary help the abilities of sociologists to act as public intellectuals, presents us with a very difficult challenge. It requires above all, as the BSA righty argues, the creation of a social space in which scientific debate and critical thinking can be deployed relatively sheltered from the influence of the political and economic powers. Although the quality of British sociology's journals, publishers, departments, plus the comparative advantage it has enjoyed from the global role of the English language, places it at the international forefront of the discipline today, it could have produced more comparative works and thoughtful critical sociological responses to the present-day situation. It could also provide us with the evidence and tools to create a successful society by expanding our comprehension of changing relationships between society and market, between society and the state and between global civil society and the international structures. In a context characterised by the declining number of research active sociology departments, demands to generate more resources through winning grants and to devote more time to administration and bureaucratic compliance, the task of enhancing sociology's public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority outside academia is rather difficult. Nonetheless, the effort to achieve a higher status and greater esteem for sociology is worth making not only on behalf of the discipline but also to diffuse a sense of the social importance of our research and knowledge among decision-makers and the wider public.

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